

The Penitent Magdalene

Sarah Biffin



Description

Sarah Biffin (1784-1850)
The Penitent Magdalene

Inscribed on backboard: Painted by Mifs/Biffin/born without arms/or legs/1825
Watercolour and bodycolour on vellum
8.2 by 8 cm., 3 by 3 in.

Born in rural Somerset, Sarah Biffin was taught the rudiments of painting by a Mr Dukes, whom she met in about 1804. She later became a pupil of the accomplished miniature painter, William Marshall Craig (1765-1827) (see no.?????). Born without arms or legs, Sarah started her artistic career exhibiting both her working practice and her art at travelling fairs. She would also rent rooms where people would pay an admission price to see her write, sew and paint using her mouth and shoulder.

Biffin entered into a contract with Dukes, who took the admission fees and paid her a small annual salary and between 1804 and 1810, they travelled extensively throughout the country. For several years, Biffin seemed happy with the arrangement, which probably also provided security; furthermore the opportunity to travel must have appealed. However, by about 1816, Biffin began to break away from Dukes and establish herself independently.

In 1808, Biffin met George Douglas, 16th Earl of Morton and Chamberlain to the Queen's Household, who became her informal advisor and arranged for her to study under Craig. He also brought her to the attention of King George III. In 1830, George IV purchased a miniature for 25 guineas and also that year she was appointed Painter in Miniature to Princess Augusta Sophia, one of the King's sisters. Biffin was later able to boast that she had the patronage of three monarchs, George IV, William IV and Queen Victoria, as well as Prince Albert.

In 1821, Biffin moved to London, where she exhibited at the Royal Academy for the first time and was awarded the large silver medal by the Royal Society of Arts. On a visit to Brussels she was appointed Miniature Painter to Willem Frederik, Prince of Orange. In 1825 she moved to Birmingham where she established herself as a teacher, offering not only in-person sessions in her studio, but also correspondence classes. She was accomplished in a range of media from porcelain to watercolour on ivory, vellum and paper. It is interesting to note that she specifically wanted to teach women, something she advertised.

In anticipation of a possible move to America, in 1841, Biffin moved to Liverpool. It seems that Biffin knew Ellen Sharples (1769-1849), wife of James Sharples (see no. 64) who had lived in the States for several years. It is also likely that Biffin would have heard about the success that several disabled artists found there. However, ill health and declining eyesight meant that Biffin remained in Britain. She found favour with the Rathbone family, well-known Liverpool philanthropists and Joseph Mayer, a noted collector, and they did much to help support her until her death in 1850.

The present painting is unusual in the artist's oeuvre, as most of Biffin's output was portraits with the exception of some still lifes and highly detailed studies of feathers, which she painted when touring. Religious subject matter is rare in her oeuvre and this may be a commission.